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Liberation Theology

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FOREWORD

In the political, social and economic upheavals of the last three decades a number of political or liberationist theologies have emerged calling upon Christians to act and reflecting a theological turn toward the wide spectrum of history's social crises and oppressions as their main, if not exclusive, area of concern. These new "theologies of liberation" stress their identity with a particular oppressed community, call for emancipatory ("revolutionary") action or praxis, and engage in theological reflection that arises out of this situation. Many of these Christians have come to recognize that the term "liberation" best describes what God is doing in their midst. However, the scope of "liberation" comprises a threefold dimension. Liberation entails a release from the oppressive aspects of the economic, social and political processes which put the poor and marginalized in a powerless situation with respect to the oppressor-groups. Furthermore, liberation is seen historically as human beings assume conscious responsibility for their own destiny, and in pursuit of this freedom of destiny, bring about desired qualitative social changes. Finally, liberation is grounded theologically in Christ who liberates from sin which is the root of all injustice on all levels of existence.

But is this understanding of liberation compatible with and appropriate to the Lutheran understanding of justification by faith? Certainly for Lutherans in Europe and North America the political incongruities between their understanding of the action of God in history and those of Latin America, Africa, Asia and elsewhere are very obvious. Gustavo Gutierrez captures this well when he remarks, "Evangelization will be really liberating when the poor themselves are the bearers of the gospel message. Then, to preach the gospel will be a rock of scandal, it will be a gospel 'unpresentable in society.' It will be

expressed in an unrefined manner, it will smell bad.”¹ Yet, however pungent the odour, this does not render liberation senseless to justification, nor should it render justification scentless to liberation. The contributors to this issue, from their various situations and perspectives, have used their theological olfactory senses to sniff out the interface between liberation and justification.

Most theological reflection for liberation methodologies begins with an assessment of one's situation and experience rather than with theological theory, dogma, or concepts. So too this issue. “I often think that if God had spared me this pilgrimage, I would have been a better adherent to the church that Luther accidentally founded, because it was far away from my comprehension, and therefore it did not disturb my personhood”, writes Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro. This African Lutheran woman pastor is the Executive Secretary for Women in Church and Society at the Lutheran World Federation and it is from this perspective that she tells of the struggle for liberation for not only herself, but for many women throughout the world, who, because they have been justified, journey together in their pilgrimage of liberation. The journey literally becomes a march as Evangelical Lutheran Church In Canada missionary to El Salvador, Brian Rude, reflects on the return of exiles to their homeland and the procession which celebrates the anniversary of Reverend Medardo Gómez's ordination as Bishop of the Salvadoran Lutheran Church. Pastor Rude becomes a missionary of the Salvadoran people to us as these processions become living images of Exodus and Resurrection, God's walk with us. Justification and liberation are seen in God's ministry, and thus in people's ministries, of accompaniment.

From these situations of experiencing liberation and justification in action a liberation methodology now shifts to a different mode of engagement—reflection. For our reflection on justification and liberation we have asked two Lutheran systematic theologians to be our interlocutors. Gottfried Brakemeier is seminary professor in Porto Alegre, Brazil, and currently President of the Lutheran World Federation, his evangelical reflection upon liberation centers on the question, “What is the gospel message for Latin America?” Associate Professor of Systematic Theology at Waterloo Lutheran Seminary, Robert

A. Kelly, addresses his question specifically to North American Lutherans, "If we have left our ideology or worldview intact, do we really believe that we are justified by faith alone without works of law?"

Dare we say it? Do we as Lutherans in Canada need to come to grips with the situation wherein our understanding and practice of justification is in need of liberation?

Our final essay returns us to being situation specific and praxis oriented. Robert Regnier, Associate Professor and Graduate Chairperson of the Department of Educational Foundations, School of Education, the University of Saskatchewan, notes that, "In constructing pedagogies of critical literacy for ethical reflection committed to the preservation, health, and safety of humankind, schools are not neutral political arenas but rather centres of ideological contestation." Professor Regnier's case study is a careful analysis of the way in which the nuclear industry and the provincial government present uranium mining, nuclear theology, and nuclear weapons in the Saskatchewan public school curriculum. Within this ideological hegemony there arises the call for a liberation ethic.

Liberation and Justification? Indeed! They both are constitutive of a theology of the cross. Miguel D'Escoto, Maryknoll priest and former government minister with the Sandinista government in Nicaragua writes:

In this process I came to the conviction that the cross is not just some type of suffering or other, as we so often think. If I have an ingrown toenail, I have a cross. Anything we don't like we call a cross. If we're suffering the consequences of our own carelessness and faults we say that it's "our cross," and that we "have to accept our cross." But that's not the cross. The cross is the inevitable consequence of accepting the will of the Father. It's the inevitable consequence of preaching the fatherhood [sic] of God and a communion of brothers and sisters among all human beings, and denouncing everything that keeps this communion from becoming reality. When you do this—and therefore want to identify with those who hunger and thirst for justice, identify with the exploited and marginalized—you invite reprisals. When you identify with those who suffer, you take the risk of reprisals. *This* is the cross.

... I came to see that the cross was the greatest act of love... And if it's the greatest act of love, then it's the greatest act of life—it's the act where life is most manifest.²

Michael N. Poellet, Guest Editor
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Notes

- ¹ Gustavo Gutierrez, "Freedom and Liberation", in Ronald H. Stone (ed.), *Liberation and Change* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1977) 93.
- ² Miguel D'Escoto in Teofilo Cabestrero (ed.), *Ministers of God, Ministers of the People: Testimonies of Faith from Nicaragua* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1983) 109-110.